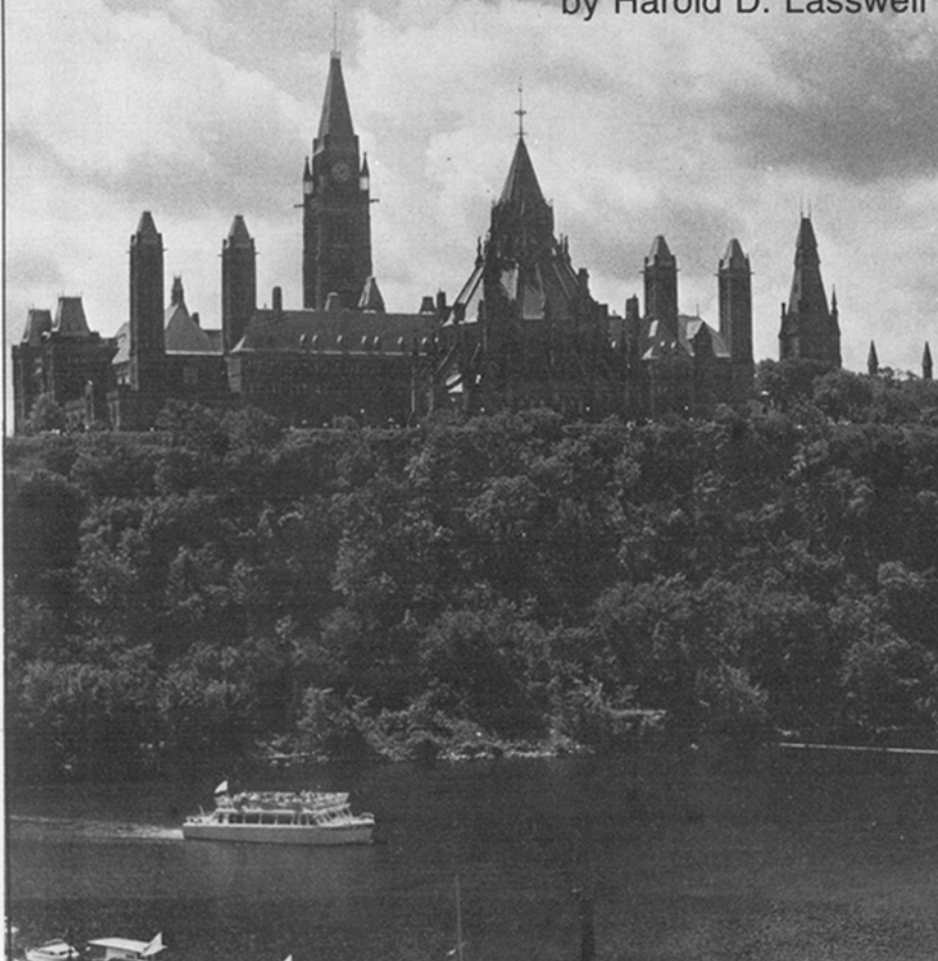


The Signature of Power

Photos and Text
by Harold D. Lasswell



ment, Ottawa

In advanced industrial societies contemporary man is achieving a new level of awareness of what he does to the physical and biological environment, and what the environment does to him. Urgent as the destructive consequences of man's actions are, they are far from summing up the significance of man and society for the natural environment or the answering impact of physical surroundings on the quality of life. We are transformers as well as destroyers. Living forms, especially human beings, add a distinctive frame of reference to the characteristic effect physical energies and particles have on one another.

The novelty lies in the symbolic use that man makes of his surroundings and the

symbolic complexity of the way he interprets an altered environment. A transformed habitat changes the experience and the behavior of man. In common with all living forms man seeks to maximize his preferred events, such as power and wealth, when he utilizes the environment. Physical resources are modified to give expression to the perspectives of individuals and groups who are influential in the body politic.

Our present problem is to consider the complex interplay between the material and the symbolic. The physical changes introduced for political purposes by architects, planners, and engineers are guided by the subjectivities—the perspectives—of designers. A completed structure influences

both the symbolic outlook and the behavioral activities of the people who adapt to its existence.

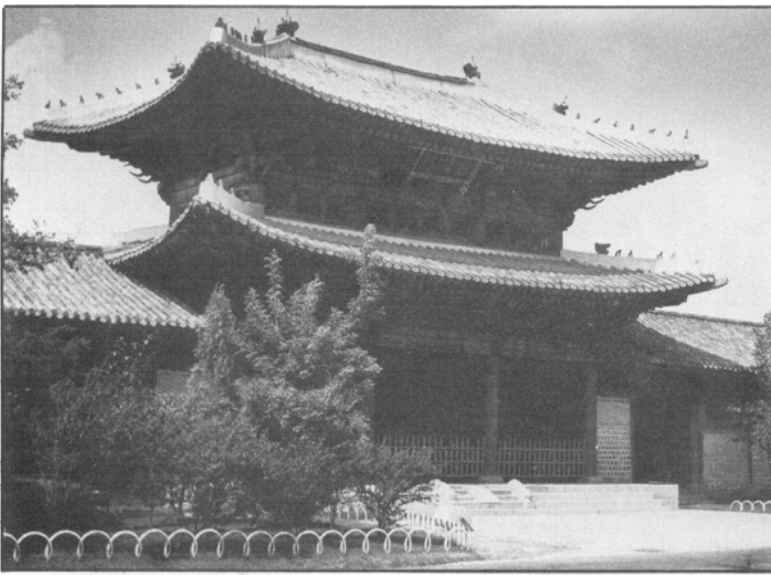
The interactions that occur in human society are simultaneous acts of communication and collaboration. Some minimum degree of physical change is inseparable from every communication. Regardless of whether physical resources are specialized to the transmission of messages, they usually have a degree of communicative impact. Physical resources may be profoundly affected by the purposes, assumptions, and identities of those people who plan or change them. Environmental design is an instrument of political power.

As we analyze political situations we become increasingly sensitive to considerations that affect "the phenomena of spacing." The human actors in any social setting have at least one fundamental characteristic in common with all living forms: they seek to maximize values (preferred events). They initiate, diffuse, and restrict institutions that are specialized to the shaping and sharing of power or any other valued outcome. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that a clue to arrangements in space is the interrelationship of values and institutions.

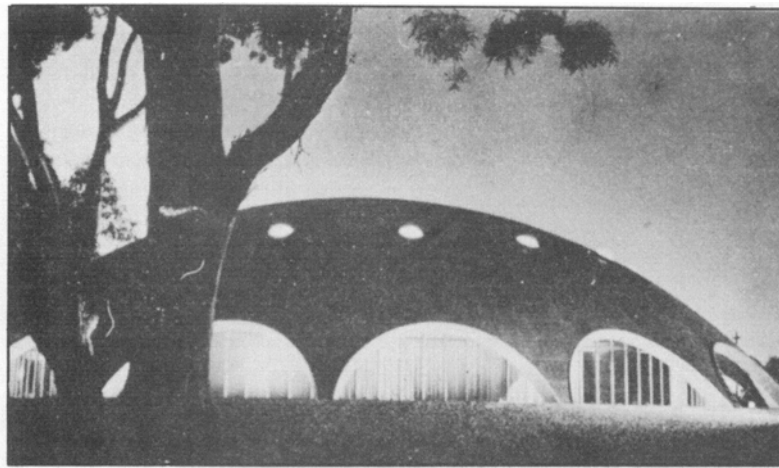
During a given period of time power may be the principal value (the "scope value") sought by a nation state or some other group. When this situation occurs, as in a protracted "war of survival," all other values (e.g., enlightenment, wealth, well-being, skill) are subordinated to serve as "base values" for the protection and realization of power. Changes in the environment may provide clues to the shifting priority of values.

The plans and changes that concern us have much in common with what is often called "architecture." The term "culture materials" designates the materials (or the energies) in the resource environment when they have been modified by man (e.g., buildings). "Technology" includes the specific operations by which a group manipulates its culture materials for any purposes whatsoever. It is plain that "engineering" technology does not necessarily aim at communication. If political architecture is conceived as an activity that masters "engineering" for purposes of communication in politics, the overlap with our interest is explicit.

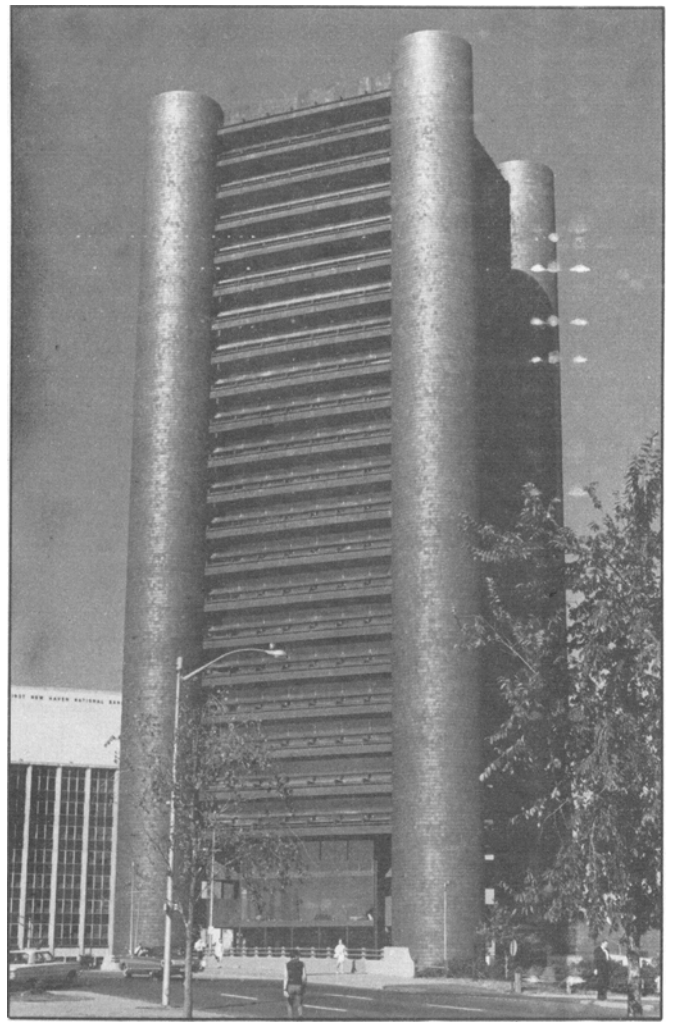
Architecture can be usefully distinguished from other skills, such as sculpture, that are specialized to the manipulation of resources for communicative purposes. We think of an architect as a specialist on the enclosure of living forms, especially peo-



Gate to Imperial Palace, Tokyo



National Science Foundation, Canberra (Australia)



VFW Headquarters, Indianapolis, Ind.

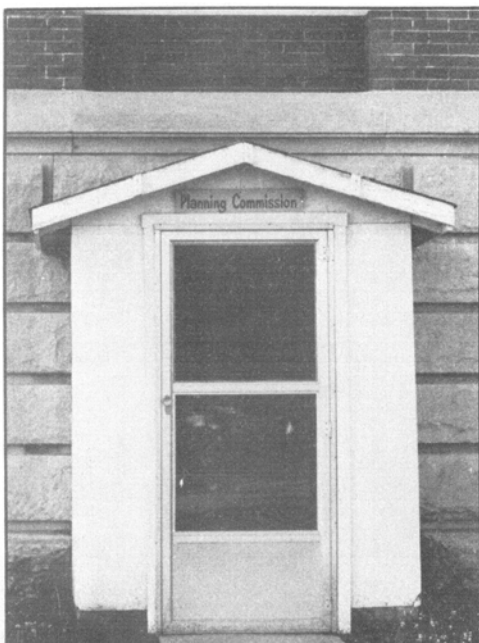




Women's Prison, Quebec



Museum, York (England)



County Court House, Franklin, Ind.

ple, who is also expected to use the enclosure to convey a message. Architecture is the handling of the material environment to achieve a degree of enclosure in fact, while at the same time forming a symbol of enclosure that may or may not be linked with symbols of political power. Sculpture is typically experienced from the outside looking in. Architecture adds the experience of the insider who is looking around or outside.

Environmental design can have policy implications. Assuming that we adopt the demand to realize human dignity on the widest possible scale, the signature of power on the world environment might contribute to the realization of a secure world and a society in which self-integrating tendencies (cultural diversity) keep the upper hand over tendencies toward self-segregation (cultural homogeneity). The latter has vastly overbalanced the former in contemporary civilization; the result has been to exacerbate rather than resolve the

public and civic order problems of advanced industrial societies. It is essential that we call a halt to these self-segregating tendencies and that we propose, promote, and execute environmental programs that give expression and support to the disposition favorable to self-integration.

In many environments public buildings and centers do not stand out; they do not provide symbols of identification with the body politic. It may be argued that the political process is not directly downgraded by these trends, since official buildings have been reflecting tendencies that are present in every value-institution sector. There appears to be a disposition to impose a single mode of construction, a limited range of materials, and a single conception of style on *all* large office or apartment buildings.

Is the inference that the political process is simply responding to a common demand for an expressionless physiognomy? Is this situation to be interpreted (in the United States, for example) as an adaptive response on the part of elites of wealth and power to the anxieties generated by fear of attack by disaffected classes? The verbalized ideology of American society is equalitarian; yet the facts are that great differences of opportunity and realization persist. Is the expressionless glass front a seemingly permeable facade behind which great inequalities can be enjoyed under conditions of minimum disclosure?

In reply it may be contended that the economies of construction on high-priced urban sites are such that "expressionlessness" is a by-product of cost and signifies nothing whatever about perspectives. However, this explanation is not entirely convincing. Why are the demands for values other than wealth not more potent in coun-



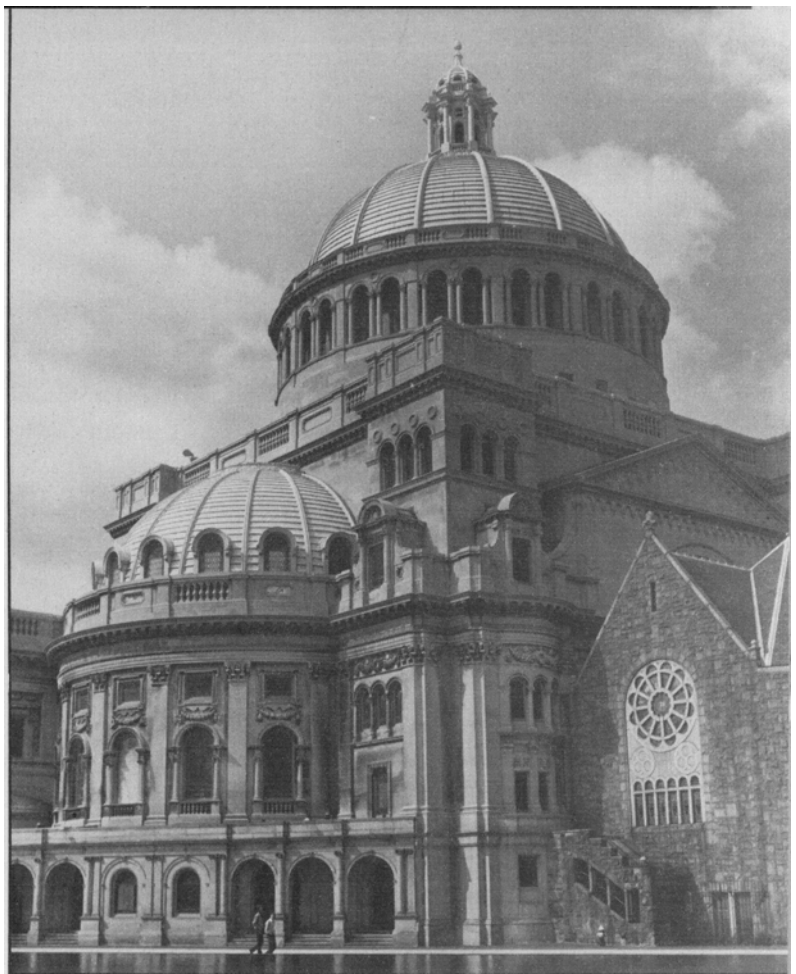
City Hall, Toronto

terbalancing the immediate and visible economies of construction?

Another interpretation challenges the category of expressionlessness when applied to glass plateaus and mountains. It is agreed that many traditional expectations are frustrated since older ornamental forms are not repeated. But what of the eventual evaluation of the glass metropolis? The sweeping lines are grandiose; and it may be that, after a period of transition has dissolved traditional rigidities of perception, we will appreciate nuances in the play of light and identify ourselves with the massive profile of "our" community.

The iconic function of the Earth is to provide an image of identity and security as we push in all directions in the effort to bring within our effective life-space the resources of a vast and largely unknown environment, where our task might conceivably be to provide the unifying purpose that has traditionally been projected onto other hypothetical intelligences. The signature of power and other human values on environment is not necessarily constricted to impacts in the immediate vicinity of the Earth. Outer boundaries are open. So, too, is human imagination.

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Christian Science Church, Boston



Jail, Crawfordsville, Ind.